DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 482 EA 030 278

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TITLE	Preparing School Leaders To Write Effectively: Strengthening Writing Instruction for Students in Educational Administration.
PUB DATE	1999-10-29
NOTE	25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration (Minneapolis, MN, October 1999).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Education; Educational Administration; Higher Education; Program Descriptions; Teacher Attitudes; *Writing Achievement; *Writing Attitudes; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper examines a program that teaches writing skills to students in an administration-preparation program. The program is broadly aimed at strengthening writing instruction and raising the level of writing competency among students in all departmental programs. The examination focuses on gaining a better understanding of the faculty's views on writing instruction, of the place of writing in departmental course work, and of the significance of writing skills in the preparation of future administrators through the department's programs. It discusses writing as a professional priority for educational administrators and writing as representative of the individual and the organization. It offers examples of modeling writing competency, of strategies for preparing future educational administrators for professional writing, of writing as a learning process, of writing as a reflective process, of prewriting, of revision, and of departmental interest in writing instruction. A survey of faculty revealed that, although student writing is a high priority and department members shared a clear view of the areas in which they expected a high level of competency in written work, faculty members had not yet reached consensus on how to treat writing within the context of departmental courses of study. (Contains 29 references.) (RJM)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Preparing School Leaders to Write Effectively:

Strengthening Writing Instruction for Students in Educational Administration

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A Paper Presented at the
Annual Convention of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA)
Minneapolis, Minnesota

October 29, 1999

EA 030 278

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Introduction

Leaders at all levels of education are responsible for communicating effectively with many external audiences as well as with members of their school organizations. The majority of reports, explanations, announcements, and policy statements that are the daily fare of educational administrators are prepared and issued in written form. It is sound strategy, therefore, for administrative training programs to prepare educational leaders to be thoughtful, competent writers.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the efforts of the Department of Educational Organization and Leadership (EOL) in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) who are engaged in an ongoing self-study of the teaching of writing to students in administration. The endeavor is broadly aimed at strengthening writing instruction and raising the level of writing competency among students in all department programs. Specific objectives in the effort include gaining a better understanding of the faculty's views on writing instruction, of the place of writing in departmental course work, and of the significance of writing skills in the preparation of future administrators through the department's programs.

Consideration of the need for specific improvements in student writing instruction in the department's administrative preparation programs was initiated in department discussions in the 1998 fall semester. I accepted responsibility for developing background material to support further discussions through exploration of current literature on administrative writing and writing instruction. I also agreed to explore and report on writing instruction, expectations, and requirements for courses within the department. The results of these efforts follow.

Background on Administrative Writing and Writing Instruction

Writing as a Professional Priority for Educational Administrators

A major component of administrative work for professional educators is the ability to structure ideas clearly and to express them deliberately in a format that is both accessible and appropriate to a variety of audiences. Although developing communication skills and understanding communication processes are essential to successful administrative performance in any organization (Conrad, 1994), effective communication is conspicuously high on the list of role expectations for administrators in education (Davis, 1997; Pankake, Stewart, & Winn, 1990). The work of educational administrators relies heavily on effective interpersonal communication (Mintzberg, 1973; Greenfield, 1995). Administrative writing serves a wide range of purposes: to inform, to instruct, to interest, to persuade, and to report and give an account of events (Joyce, 1991; Reep & Sharp, 1999; Posden, 1991). Educational administrators are frequently called upon to offer concise, detailed information that effectively tells the story of their schools and school programs (Kernan-Schloss, 1990). Because they serve in leadership roles, their response to these demands is usually subjected to close scrutiny both inside and outside of the school organization.

Writing as representative of the individual and the organization. An administrator's writing may reveal more to an audience than the writer may intend. What is said is important, but how it is said is equally important (Hutto & Criss, 1993). People in the various audiences to whom an administrator's writing is addressed may form their impressions of that individual primarily or solely on the basis of his or her writing (Roddick, 1984). Because educational administrators play a very public role in

representing their organizations, the impressions formed through public scrutiny may have far-reaching consequences. As Wycoff (1991) notes, "Writing abilities are as visible as a person's wardrobe" (p. 64). If an administrator demonstrates poor writing skills—if his or her communication lacks purpose or if the message is unclear or unfocused—the credibility of the writer may be immediately questioned or challenged.

As professional educators, administrators are called upon every day to speak and to write. When they do so, they advertise their progress as well as their potential worth (Bovee, 1980). Through their writing, administrators demonstrate how they do things in their professional setting. They show others how well they perform and how well they think (Posden, Allen, Pethel, & Waide, 1997). Their readers may subsequently apply whatever assessment they make—positive or negative—to the organizations in which these writers have leadership roles.

Modeling writing competency. In education, an administrative leader is typically recognized as a behavioral model, as well as an official voice for his or her school organization. For administrators, an important payoff for good writing is good public relations because, as Yerkes and Morgan (1991) explain, "Administrators are noticed, listened to, and influential in the lives of many people" (p. 25). As community and instructional leaders, educational administrators have the opportunity to model and to teach the power of the written word (Posden et al., 1997). Through their writing, they may demonstrate "how to organize thoughts logically and succinctly, choose appropriate formats for written documents, and reach targeted audiences" (p. 3). If, however, they lack the necessary writing skills, they may do no more than demonstrate their own foibles and inadequacies.

Preparing Future Educational Administrators for Professional Writing

An emphasis on the essential nature of good writing and the acquisition of effective writing skills is fundamental in a program that prepares students for the work of educational administration. Written expression is generally acknowledged as an administrative skill that is crucial to job success, but research in adult writing indicates that adeptness in writing is not steadily developed after undergraduate studies are completed (Aldrich, 1982). Although educators may have considerable writing experience in their undergraduate and graduate course work, they generally have little specific training in the kinds of writing needed in administrative work (Reep & Sharp, 1999). They may, in fact, take many courses in professional subject matter, such as educational theory and administrative principles, without experiencing a strong emphasis on the development of attitudes and skills essential to becoming effective writers.

Writing as a learning process. Programs that prepare students to become educational leaders may not fully support writing development by not focusing on a basic tenet of writing instruction: Writing is not merely a learning outcome; it is a learning process. Dickson (1995), Eastman (1970), and Murray (1982) maintain that a major problem underlying poor writing development at the college level is the general belief that writing is only a means to communicate learning rather than a process for discovering meaning. Murray makes a strong case for the limitations imposed by treating writing solely as a product, arguing that a major purpose for assigning writing should be to help students learn to use language to ascertain meaning. Dickson further asserts that writing should not only generate meaning, but should also promote a sense of discovery, as writers "challenge, refine, or confirm" the way they see the world (p. 20).

An instructor's attitude toward writing may specifically shape the way writing is treated in a course of study. Zeiser (1999) contends that when writing is treated solely as a product or vehicle for the explication of what students have retained from a course, professors short-change students by not teaching the benefits of drafting and revising. Zeiser argues that writing is better treated as a process, "an actively thought-about idea or topic" (p. 595). He further asserts that instructors should design and evaluate writing assignments to help students learn to become competent writers as they assimilate the substance of a course.

Writing as a reflective process. As a process, writing is reflective as well as recursive. As an active component of the writing process, reflection may be especially significant in the training of administrators. Reflective writing is particularly helpful in developing a position and a direction while working through the many complex issues and dilemmas faced by administrators (Wibel, 1991). Through application of a deliberate process of thinking, writing, and revising, prospective administrators may develop and improve their critical thinking and writing abilities (Zeiser, 1999). On the other hand, without reflection, revision, and editing, an administrator's writing may prove to be "equivalent to professional Russian roulette" (Wycoff, 1991, p. 76).

Advocates of emphasizing process in writing instruction find considerable advantage in this approach, as it requires students to think carefully about their writing as it progresses through the process stages. The writing process is generally projected in four stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing (Joyce, 1991; Posden et al., 1997; Reep & Sharp, 1999; Yerkes & Morgan, 1991). Joyce explains that the process is recursive because writers continue to move back and forth among the stages until a

satisfactory final document is achieved. To be progressive, however, iterations of their work require writers to look for improvements that address concerns established in the planning or prewriting stage. Although initial drafting and final editing are essential steps in the writing process, prewriting and revising are even more important as steps that deliberately improve the writer's presentation and better enable the reader's understanding. When these steps are neglected or trivialized, writing is less likely to reach its full potential and the writer is less likely to gain substantially from the experience.

Prewriting as a first step. Prewriting is particularly important because it entails not only gathering and organizing information, but also founding purpose, generating ideas, and determining strategy (Joyce, 1991; Posden et al., 1997). In deliberately carrying out these prewriting functions, writers are prompted to clarify their thinking about the issues that they wish to address and the idea patterns through which they attempt to express their thoughts. The alignment of purpose and strategy with content guides and assists the selection of an appropriate organizational structure for writing (Reep & Sharp, 1999; Yerkes & Morgan, 1991).

Another significant prewriting component that sharpens the writer's perspective of organizational structure is consideration of the audience for whom the writing is intended (Roddick, 1984; Joyce, 1991). It is particularly appropriate for administrators to give careful consideration to the interests and levels of understanding in their various audiences because, according to Reep and Sharp (1999), such consideration directly influences the language and structure of writing. Wycoff (1991) recommends that the first question a writer should ask in preparing to write is "Who is my audience?"(p. 67).

This aspect of prewriting is extremely important to educational administrators, as they are so often responsible for explaining and interpreting complex issues and ideas to a variety of audiences, including public readers, students, and other educators.

Revision as whole document improvement. Good writing rarely occurs without revising (Wycoff, 1991). As a crucial step in the writing process, revision places the writer in the position of a critic who considers his or her initial draft from an objective point of view. Revision may be most effective if the writer puts himself or herself in the reader's place and attempts to determine how the intended audience is likely to perceive the message (Joyce, 1991). For educational administrators, therefore, the step of revision requires careful consideration of the range of information and understanding with which intended audiences are familiar.

More than simply keeping the reader in mind, an effective writer must empathize with his or her audience (Wycoff, 1991). Educational administrators write for many diverse audiences. Academic writing for a course of study, scholarly writing for publication in a practitioner or research journal, and professional writing for educators, students, and public audiences have much in common. They all require subject area expertise, clarity of thought and expression, and provident structuring. Each area of writing, however, must be tailored to achieve maximum audience effect. As Wycoff puts it, "Knowing your audience will help you to organize your material so that it has the best chance of being understood" (p. 64).

In deliberating the effect of a document on an audience, writers who make full use of revision look not only at the organizational structure of their work, but also consider its readability and overall coherence. In addition to considering how a draft may be

improved through reorganization of its parts, effective revision explores the need for transitions between topics; addition, subtraction, and emphasis of ideas; and gaps or digressions in topic presentation (Joyce, 1991). Revising may, in fact, merge with editing in examining paragraphs, sentences, and language for readability, as well as for technical accuracy and appropriate use of conventions. Consideration of the effect of a whole document through the revision step prompts the writer's editing efforts to be audience-centered as well as rule-centered. A document may be technically correct in that it follows all the rules and conventions of punctuation and grammar, yet it may fail in its purpose because it does not effectively engage or inform its readers.

Writing instruction in administrative training. In the field of education, the writing skills of administrators are always in the spotlight. In a recent study, Davis (1998) found that one of the top five reasons that educational administrators in California lost their jobs was their failure to communicate effectively with other members of their organization and with the public. The need for a high level of writing competency in educational administration may be readily established through consideration of the job requirements typical to administrative positions in school organizations. The establishment of a fully articulated administrative training plan that includes process as a component of writing instruction, however, is a complex and challenging task that may involve an important change in perspective.

The shift from using writing to test students' subject knowledge to using writing to assist students' learning requires a basic change in the attitudes of students and instructors (Zeiser, 1999; Reep & Sharp, 1999). Using the writing process as a learning process calls not only for a significant change in the way writing is treated in a course of

study, but also for a fundamental change in the way students and instructors in administrative training programs think about the function and purpose of writing.

Writing Expectations and Requirements in EOL Programs

Departmental Interest in Writing Instruction

Although the EOL Department at UIUC has a long history of interest in improving student writing, the concern did not appear as a regular agenda item at department meetings until the 1998 fall semester. When discussion was initiated, it became clear that interest in improving student writing extended to all of the department's programs. The best approach to acting on that interest, however, was not easily determined. Early discussions identified three basic problem areas:

1. Writing expectations and requirements currently in effect in department courses were not generally known. Other than instances in which department members co-taught courses or conferred on course requirements, materials, or student performance, exchanges of information and ideas on writing instruction had not regularly occurred within the department. Patterns in writing instruction and in types of writing to be taught were not clearly established for most department programs.

2. Current attitudes on teaching writing as a process were not generally known. The fundamental question of whether writing for course assignments should be treated as a process to develop student learning as well as a product to assess student learning had not been previously discussed at the department level.

3. The position of writing as a component of department programs was not generally known. The need for a systematic description of writing expectations for

program courses, the need to establish a progression in writing skills and experiences from program entry to completion, and the need to develop a comprehensive approach to support student writing progress had not been previously addressed.

Questions

Based on the department's early discussions of concerns about student writing and the suggestions of department members who strongly supported an expanded emphasis on writing instruction, I considered the following areas of inquiry:

- To what extent do department members share expectations for student writing skills?
- To what extent do department members currently apply patterns in types of writing and in writing instruction to course work ?
- To what extent do department members presently treat writing as a process?
- To what extent do department members envision a planned entry-to-exit sequence in writing instruction for departmental programs?

Methods

Following preliminary discussions with several department members, I prepared and distributed a questionnaire that I hoped would provoke consideration of a number of concerns. The questionnaire asked what types of writing and writing standards department members typically require, how they prepare students to meet writing requirements, what processes they use in teaching writing, and what sequence in the teaching of writing they deem appropriate for the department's programs.

I formally posed these questions to eight department members in a series of interviews over a two-month period during the fall semester. They identified and commented on student writing in a total of 20 courses from their past and current teaching schedules. I then supplemented the initial interviews with a second round of follow-up discussions to pursue additional topics of interest with individual department members.

The details of my inquiry became discussion topics in department meetings throughout the remainder of the 1998-99 school year, as I shared the results of the interviews and my literature search in administrative writing and writing instruction. This effort has been renewed in the current school year, and I expect it to continue as a recurring item on department meeting agendas.

Results

Department members were open and candid in their responses to my interview questions, offering an enhanced picture of their interests and concerns with regard to student writing and writing instruction. In follow up discussions, I was able to pursue a variety of corollary issues and interests. I was subsequently able to make a number of determinations about requirements, expectations, attitudes, and instructional practices related to student writing within the department. These were easily categorized into areas of common agreement and of issues unresolved.

Common ground. Department members share at least six important perspectives on student writing:

1. Without exception, department members hold in high regard the importance of writing in their courses as a means to aid and to assess student learning.

2. Department members generally expect student competency in five skill areas associated with writing: (a) effective presentation of ideas; (b) suitable organizing principles and formats; (c) coherence and unity of expression; (d) appropriate language facility and style; and (e) correct syntax, word use, and punctuation.

3. Department members assign a broad spectrum of writing designed to maximize student response in their courses of study. Assignments range from issue-centered research papers that include literature searches and analysis to administrative memorandums that address problems within educational organizations.

4. Department members require student work in five writing strands: (a) informative writing that conveys data, (b) narrative writing that gives an account of events, (c) persuasive writing that seeks to influence opinions, (d) interpretive writing that offers instructive analysis, and (e) research writing that reports inquiry and substantiates findings. These strands closely correlate with the five essential purposes of administrative writing outlined by Joyce (1991), Reep and Sharp (1999), and Posden (1991).

5. As a group, department members strongly advocate writing instruction that stresses appropriate organization and structure, effective presentation, and the integration of ideas from multiple sources. They also advocate the development of writing skills through continuing feedback that emphasizes the effective use of format, clarity of expression, and precision in the development and support of ideas.

6. Department members collectively describe five areas in which they regularly offer specific writing instruction in their courses: (a) constructing an argument; (b) using

narration to define, analyze, and interpret experiences; (c) preparing summaries and critiques; (d) composing a research paper; and (e) planning and organizing a dissertation.

Issues Unresolved. Department members did not reach consensus in at least three significant areas under consideration:

1. In describing writing expectations, department members differentiate between those expected of entry-level students and those anticipated at a more advanced program stage. They have not agreed, however, on a clear delineation of writing skill levels in terms of experiences, abilities, and specific proficiencies, other than those needed for the doctoral dissertation.

2. Although they give considerable attention to designing writing assignments to help students maximize their learning experience in individual courses, department members do not typically associate these writing assignments with a general advancement in writing skills, nor have they agreed as to whether such an association is useful.

3. Department members have not reached closure in considering the feasibility of establishing a planned sequence in writing instruction. They noted that the department enrolls a broad mix of masters, advanced certificate, and doctoral students whose writing skills and experiences vary considerably. They also observed that students enrolled in department programs, other than those organized as cohorts, are not required to take courses in any particular order.

Discussion

In undertaking this self-study of department writing expectations, requirements, and instructional practices as a response to faculty interest and as a means of learning

through our discussions, we have made good progress. Although we have not yet worked out a specific means for systematically improving the writing skills of students in department programs, we have raised and discussed a number of pertinent issues that might not otherwise have been addressed by the group. Consequently, we now have some better mutual understanding of faculty views on writing, the place of writing in department programs, and the significance of writing skills for future administrators

Faculty views on writing. Student writing is a high priority in EOL programs. Members of the department are committed to the continuation of work toward that improvement. They share the view that programs designed to prepare candidates for administrative service in public and higher education must ensure that graduates possess communication skills that will meet or exceed the demands of their professional work.

Department members further acknowledge that department courses should support the development of writing skills through instruction designed to improve the clarity of thought, organization, planning, and expression that is essential to good writing. They have not, however, fully confronted the question of how that skill development may best be prompted and supported through department curricula.

The place of writing in departmental course work. Department members share a clear view of the areas in which they expect a high level of competency in written work completed for their courses. They offer students a variety of instructional approaches intended to engage and instruct students in writing, as well as in course content. Until they began this study, however, department members seldom shared these expectations and instructional approaches with their colleagues.

Despite the importance attached to it, writing heretofore has often been relegated to a secondary role in departmental course work, with the notable exception of courses designed to prepare doctoral students to begin their dissertations. Department members typically have regarded the complex task of conveying as much as possible of the vast store of information and ideas pertinent to each course as their primary responsibility. In effect, writing has been more often employed as a means to demonstrate and assess student learning than as an ongoing learning activity. Whether this is advisable is a question the department has yet to consider.

The significance of writing skills for future administrators. The importance of a high level of writing competence for educational administrators, as emphasized in current literature, has never been contested in departmental discussions. Department members have been particularly sensitive to the public perspective on administrative writing, agreeing that public audiences may regard it as representative of organizations, as well as of individuals. Although they have wholeheartedly supported writing as a significant component of preparing future administrators, they have not yet reached consensus on how to treat writing within the context of departmental courses of study.

Future Prospects

Addressing Basic Questions

Many issues remain for the department to address regarding what should be done to improve student writing. The following questions are fundamental:

- Should generalized levels of writing skill be designated as exit competencies in specific departmental programs?

- Should program-specific writing expectations be prepared and distributed to students entering EOL programs?
- How may writing assignments in specific courses be related to general advancement in writing skills and experiences?
- How may an increased emphasis on process in writing instruction contribute to the improvement of student writing?
- To what extent is it feasible to integrate writing as a learning process into departmental curricula?

Clearing Obstacles

Departmental discussions have thus far uncovered several major hurdles that need to be cleared before the above questions may be answered and the next steps taken toward improving student writing. Repositioning of writing in the department curriculum must deal with at least three major concerns: (a) finding time for expanded writing instruction, (b) establishing the role of writing in administrative preparation programs, and (c) dealing with the potential distraction from other program goals that may result from an expanded emphasis on writing.

Finding time. An expanded emphasis on writing will likely require additional instructional time in courses already burdened with heavy obligations for presentation of constantly growing inventories of information and concepts. An expanded commitment to the improvement of student writing may require some prioritizing of course content to make room for more writing instruction. This problem may be prove less difficult, however, if writing is approached as a process for learning, as well as a means for assessment.

Less time may need to be drawn from teaching course content, for example, by adapting prewriting activities to the exploration of content issues, as advocated by Dickson (1995), Eastman (1970), Murray (1982), and Zeiser (1999). The same may be accomplished by using revision as a mechanism for analyzing, interpreting, or clarifying subject area data, as noted by Joyce (1991), Wibel (1991), and Wycoff (1991).

Treating writing as a means of exploring, developing, and reshaping information into new ideational forms may contribute substantially to student learning of course material. If the writing process is treated as a thinking process through which a better understanding of course content may be acquired, then writing may be more actively employed to support learning and keep additional time requirements to a minimum.

Establishing the role of writing. Whether writing should be a primary instructional concern for an administrative preparation program is, of course, open to debate. It seems reasonable to assume that graduate students admitted to EOL programs should already be accomplished writers and, therefore, the department should not have a major responsibility for teaching them how to write. Admission screening procedures that include writing samples regularly demonstrate, however, that students enter EOL programs with a considerable range of writing proficiencies and problems.

Unless administrative preparation programs address the considerable variance in student writing skills by determining and supporting meaningful program standards in writing, the needs of student may not be well served. A student conceivably might complete his or her program without effectively addressing or, perhaps, even being fully aware of writing skill deficiencies until professional work begins. Acknowledging the

extraordinary significance of effective writing to the work of educational administration is an important first step toward making it a major facet of training future administrators.

Dealing with distraction. Writing may be viewed not only as a lesser adjunct to the serious work of instruction in educational administration, but also as a distraction from more important instructional goals. In this context, it may be seen as having only limited use as a substantive measure of student learning. If student writing is employed as an occasional, structured recitation of acquired knowledge rather than as an ongoing process of developing thought, it may well function as little more than a diversion from the main path of instruction.

If, on the other hand, writing is treated as a process of discovery, of individual determination of meaning, of refinement in understanding as Dickson (1995) and Murray (1982) recommend, then it may become a powerful tool that serves rather than diverts from the purpose of instruction. Attitudes toward writing conveyed by course instructors through their approach to teaching and learning may be the key to making student writing and writing instruction a valuable component of any department program or course of study.

Conclusion

Although the goal of improving student writing may receive hearty applause in almost any educational environment, as it did in our department, the best means of achieving that objective is likely to be a thorny issue. Educators usually have strong opinions about writing, but may not always hold views in common with their colleagues. There may, in fact, be some considerable reluctance to share instructional methods and materials among educators at all levels of schooling.

Public school research indicates that instructors are not always eager to discuss their pedagogical methods with colleagues (Friend & Cook, 1996; Inger, 1993; Torres, 1996). This may hold true for higher education as well. Successful sharing of instructional approaches and materials requires some preparation, particularly in the establishment of a high level of mutual trust, respect, and belief in the value of collaboration (Friend & Cook, 1996).

Without adequate preparation, the sharing of instructional methodology may even be perceived as threat to what Inger (1993) calls "the norm of privacy" (p. 1), a long-standing though seldom mentioned professional norm that values non-interference with another educator's views or practices (Little 1990). Therefore, it seems advisable for our department to work slowly, but deliberately toward expanding our mutual concern for the improvement of student writing to include the sharing of instructional ideas and methods.

Two rich areas of discussion that may serve to engage department members in a specific exchange of views on student writing are writing assignment and writing assessment. Through my follow up discussions with individual department members last year, I learned of many creative and fruitful approaches to designing student writing assignments. I believe it would be mutually beneficial for department members to share their assignment ideas and designs. It may also be useful to refer to literature sources for an even broader expansion of possibilities. Ross (1990), Tibbetts and Tibbetts (1981), and Trimmer and Sommers (1984) offer a wide variety of ideas, forms, and structures intended to provoke and support good student writing.

In a department meeting last spring, the issue of appropriate approaches to assessment was raised and generated sufficient interest to suggest the need for further

consideration. The literature on writing assessment offers many interesting alternative approaches to the evaluation of student writing. Davis, Scriven, and Thomas (1987), Smith (1991), and White (1985) suggest consideration of five or six different approaches, with selection to be determined according to the needs of the students and the instructor. A review and discussion of alternative approaches to the evaluation of student writing may be an effective means of promoting further discussion and debate about useful assessment practices.

The exchange of views, the give and take of argument, and the challenge to current perspectives seem essential in finding the additional common ground that will enable department members to reach accord on how best to make the kind of improvements in student writing that they all see as necessary. For our department, the importance of a high level of student writing competency in every program is a given. The search for the most appropriate means to achieve that level of competency must continue as a work in progress.

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